

Why Beauty Matters by Roger Scruton

Review by Daniel Kenneth Villanueva

Based on the documentary, how has the “Classical” and “Modern” take on art been presented?

The classical view of art is presented as the correct view on art and modern art is the incorrect view on art. This explanation could be rationalized by Scruton’s experience of what art should be. When a person becomes old, they would like to stick with what they have experienced in the past when there is no pragmatic reason to move with the times. This attitude is in contrast with the experiences of the younger generation, a generation that wants to explore the world. This phenomenon is called nostalgia.

Scruton said that the classical art is beautiful while the modern art is ugly. This is simply an inflexibility on the perspective of what art should be. If we look at the excellence of the modern and classical art based on how it allures us, one could be made to be as good as the other. A classical art could be unoriginal or ugly for its class and could be easily ignored or a modern art could make you resonate with the emotion in the canvas. It should be noted that straw manning is involved in some extent since the modern shown are the ones that are ugly, and the classical art shown is informed to be beautiful.

The classical art vs modern art is indirectly presented as a fight of holy vs unholy. This is done by saying that the pursuit of beauty (something that according to Scruton, only classical art has) is a substitute to religion. To say that classical art is a substitute to a construct with a deliberately false mythology is something that is apt since the classical art community prides itself from following guidelines that are deconstructed in modern art as antiquated and stifling. Although the camaraderie formed from the creation of classical art is something that allowed the creation of beautiful art works, this also stifles innovation by limiting the range of correct art to only something that inspires awe. As to the aspect of the fight of holy vs unholy, it could be justified by seeing that classical art is also propped up by the Christian churches.

One thing that is also implied but not specifically stated in the documentary is that what is considered as classical art is limited to only something that would be considered beautiful by English standards of beauty and something that is done through English methods. Although adding internationality to Scruton’s thesis is not fundamentally important, the endorsement of classical art could be made something more sinister, as a method to shoehorn Western ideas in a manner that shows the westerners to be in the right side of history. This would be important since Islamic, Chinese, and Japanese art exists that also shares the fascination with deliberation as with the touted classical art but would simply be ignored due to a lack of exposure to it. As a counterpoint, Scruton did not consider the international versions of modern art, opting to stick with the English traditions of modern art. In retrospect, this kind of omission could be excusable since Scruton is pandering to an English audience.

Another thing that was seen is that Scruton praised classical music and ancient Greek sculpture making. One thing of note in his exploration of classical music is that even though the music is sad, we can be happy from hearing it simply because it is a wonderful piece of music that brings about nostalgia. I would surmise that Scruton would not appreciate performance art since performance art prides itself more on proving a point than in something that should be beautiful simply by application of classical

standards of beauty. I would however concede that performance art is difficult for people to get to since performance art means understanding why an art is being done rather than simply appreciating it for its beauty. Seeing the performance art without proper context is like looking at a foreign comedy; even if it is translated to you, there are still some things you would not get without its cultural contexts.

According to Scruton, why can't everybody become an artist and why can't every object become art?

According to Scruton, everybody cannot become an artist because becoming an artist means requiring mastery in craft. This logic is incomplete since a society could subjectively define a definition of an artist such that another society would not consider the artist to be sufficiently good.

According to Scruton, not every object can become art because art objects need to be considered beautiful on their own right in the first place. This may seem to make sense in the surface, but it ignores the part where we could find beauty in things that we did not see as beautiful at first. For example, to an untrained eye a smartphone is not beautiful, but once you were able to use one, you are now able to see the beauty of the smartphone and thus would be able to appreciate it.

What has caused the denial of beauty? What does it say about the postmodern and contemporary period?

The cause of denial of beauty is that beauty is no longer found to be necessary to convey the action desired. Beauty for beauty's sake would make the building be more expensive to build than necessary, such as in office buildings. I would, however, concede that the creation of classically beautiful structures would make the structures stand longer through the test of time, but simply creating structures that are distinct from the surroundings, such as green architecture, would achieve the same effect while leveraging new concepts in architecture to improve efficiency and costs.

The denial of beauty states that the postmodern and contemporary period are no longer saddled with the old concept of conformity based on what it considered beautiful. Time has moved forward and while classical dogma says that beautiful room is one that is decorated with objects of beauty, contemporary dogma would reaffirm that beautiful room is simply a room that is clean.

What was Scruton's take on Conceptual Art?

Scruton's take on conceptual art is that conceptual art is an includable to the definition of art that would in the end bring disdain to the definition of art. He had this thought since he is misunderstanding what art by surrounding himself with strawman arts that show the ugliness of modern art. Moreover, he is misguided by thinking that art must be beautiful to be good; a good art simply one that is able to invoke your emotions.

I would, however, concede that he might have a point on his criticism against his strawman examples. Art, as an establishment, glorifies a sense of elitism, which is propped up by the various people that buy art for money laundering purposes. Art should go back to the roots of trying to make us feel and not only as a vessel to prove a point or create an overevaluation of kitsch from connected artists in something that would look like an in-joke for the people that are outside of the art industry.